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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed writing in prominent British newspapers concerning homosexuality and lesbianism, focusing on these elements of discourse: discourse themes and assumptions underlying their choice; information treated as given or implied in the text; relationships with other discursive formations and texts; signification about the writer's authority and degree of certainty; the speaker's perception of agency and causality; and lexical choice. Legislation concerning or referring to homosexuality in Great Britain is chronicled, with attention given to specific terminology and its implications. Newspaper reports of one case in which a female school principal was criticized for a comment about heterosexual love are examined for reference to political correctness and lesbian stereotypes. Reportage of the parliamentary vote on raising the age of consent for gay men is also analyzed. It is concluded that collectively, these statements form a pattern of discourse that creates an atmosphere supportive of legitimate censure of the open expression of homosexuality. A revision of public discourse patterns is urged. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

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"PRETENDED FAMILIES" AND "FRAGILE YOUTH": BRITISH PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT LESBIANS AND GAYS

Elizabeth Morrish

Since consenting homosexual acts between men, in private, were made legal in Great Britain in 1967, gay sex and the gay lifestyle have been brought further and further within the remit of the civil and criminal law. The purpose of this paper will be to trace the ideological structures represented in current and recent discursive practice about lesbians and gays. The tools of analysis will be provided by 'critical discourse analysis' and based on a framework suggested by Norman Fairclough (1992). In the case of discourse about lesbians and gays, there is a clear cumulative effect which leads to an atmosphere in which homosexuality is deemed 'unnatural' and threatening to the dominant culture, and in which homophobic acts are deemed justified and in the interests of the 'general public.'

The work of Michel Foucault has been highly influential in the development of this approach to discourse. Rather than a straightforward analysis of sentences or conversations, Foucault insists upon the analysis of "discursive formations", or a kind of genealogical investigation into why, at a particular point in time, one set of sentences about a particular topic is more likely to occur than any other. Furthermore, people are positioned as 'subjects' within a discursive formation. In this way, the discourse shapes not only ideology, but also identity and the sense of self.

In preparing this paper I have selected for analysis legal texts and also reports from British quality newspapers. The aim is to identify prevailing discursive patterns and linkages, and the way in which these construct subjectivity and reveal the thematic sites of hegemonic struggle and discourse change. For each text, or group of texts, I will be looking at some of the following elements of discourse,:

- themes: discourse themes as well as what appears initially in clauses and the assumptions

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underlying these choices.

- presuppositions: information treated as given or implied in the text.

- interdiscursivity: relations between other discursive formations, or, intertextuality, explicit references to another text or texts, which may then form an intertextual chain.

- modality: the signification of the speaker/writer's authority about the text and the degree of certainty, generality or 'truth' of the utterance. Hodge and Kress write that: "a speaker uses modalities to protect his utterance from criticism" (125). Modality within an utterance can be revealed by a number of devices in the text, e.g. tense (present tense suggesting universal validity), plurality (plurals suggest generalization about a category), negation, and adverbial choice.

- transitivity: the speaker's perception of agency and causality, e.g., active or passive verbs, nominalizations, types of verb e.g., action, event, relational, mental.

- lexical choice: the way in which the speaker/writer classifies and categorizes by lexical choice. Meaning is not only by reference and denotation, connotations also construct meaning. Adjectives, particularly carry a heavy ideological burden. Words may also change their meaning according to context of situation, and to who is using them.

Legislative Discourse in Britain

It is commonly believed that homosexuality was legalized by the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, although this in fact served merely to decriminalize consenting homosexual acts between men over 21 years, in private. Britain has spent the intervening 28 years overseeing the progressive re-criminalization of gay sex, and presently many types of sexual acts and sexual encounters remain illegal. In 1967 Lord Reid (a Law Lord) said that: "There is a material difference between merely *exempting certain conduct* from criminal penalties and making it lawful in the full sense....indulgence in these practices....is corrupting" (qtd.in Gooding 214). We can perhaps identify a discourse theme

of ambivalence about legality, with a presupposition that these acts naturally fall outside the law and that the legal system is doing gays something of a favor. The lexical choice of "indulgence" connotes a scene of dissolute intemperance. The sinful theme is underlined by the adjective "corrupting' which is predicative and generalized to all instances by the present tense copula.

Twenty one years later, the most notoriously homophobic legislation to be enacted in Britain since 1967, has been the Thatcher-inspired Section 28 of the Local Government Act, 1988. This legislation has a completely ideological nature and at present there have been no challenges based on an alleged contravention. It states that a local authority (in charge of schools, facilities) shall not:

1. a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality

b) promote the teaching in any (publicly) maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

Nothing in subsection (1) above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.

(Colvin and Hawkesley 38)

The language of this legislation is intended to be offensive to gays at first glance, but is worthy of closer investigation. The domain of a key verb is extended, only in the context of its application to gays; 'promoting' homosexuality is most often read as acknowledging it. A discourse theme of invisibility can be recognized; homosexuality is restricted to the sphere of the "private" and must not be "promoted" into the public sphere. "Promotion" has dual meanings of 'elevation' and

'publicizing'. Evidently gays must be kept firmly in the lower echelons of society. Intertextual echoes appeared in 1994 in the Smith-Helms amendment passed by the US Senate which will cut Federal aid to schools which "promote" homosexuality as "a positive life style alternative". Two other discourse themes occur, which are recurrent ones in public discussion of homosexuality: family life and disease.

The presupposition laid out in section 28, is that the category of "family" is a rigid and impermeable one - it is unambiguously heterosexual, while the attributive adjective "pretended" declares the gay family to be invalid. It appears that most often in contemporary discourse, the term "family" has become a codeword for the exclusion of homosexuality. Susan Reinhold (1994) points out that "family" is never defined except in relation to what it is not (i.e. the gay couple raising children together): instead it remains as an idealization in the minds of Conservative traditionalists, and reinforced by "family life" metaphors. Homosexuality is an expression of sexuality, not a family relationship, however, some families are based on homosexual relationships, and by implication the section derides these by evoking a childish game of "let's pretend". Gays and lesbians, typically, have shown their resilience to this act, not only by resisting legislation aimed at making them invisible, even vilified, but also by reclaiming the language of the Act. People are bidden to gay events by posters declaring "bring the whole pretended family".

The theme of "the spread of disease" mentioned in Section 28 draws on much previous and current discourse which sees the gay subject solely in terms of the likelihood of transmission of AIDS. Nominalization of "spread" deletes agency and obscures the subject. This message is implicitly recoverable from the text; homosexuals spread disease. Interestingly AIDS is not named - presumably to reinforce the notion that homosexuality is generally unhealthy. The message becomes clearer when we contrast "the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease" with perhaps another more neutral choice of words "AIDS/HIV prevention education".

Discourse about Lesbians

British law, like most other Western legal systems, has historically had little to say about lesbians. In 1921 the House of Lords rejected a motion to introduce an offence of "gross indecency between female persons". The bill failed, only because it would have brought the "horror of lesbianism to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it." [Gooding 136] Perhaps lesbians are making progress in the 1990's, because recently they have attracted the notice of the law. We observe a familiar pattern, though, where existing laws are used to discriminatory effect. Most damaging are those laws which have been modified or enacted to try to ensure that lesbians are denied their human rights to raise children; lesbians face discrimination in the areas of adoption and donor insemination.

The Human Fertilization and Embryology Act, 1990 makes it a condition that, in order for a clinic to retain its licence, "a woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment (including the need of that child for a father)." [qtd in Gooding]. The grammatical theme of this directive is "a woman", however she is not the semantic subject of this sentence. In fact, since this is a passive construction there are no agents, giving the impression that all women are subject to anonymous dictates. The modality choice of "shall not" admits no contradictions to this edict. We can trace a logical connection between "the welfare of any child" and "the need of that child for a father"; the latter "need" presented here as a self-evident presupposition. The result is a transparent attempt to outlaw the possibility of donor insemination for lesbians, a fact underscored by the accompanying instruction that treatment services should act with regard to "the sanctity of family life".

The Children's Act 1989, in its section concerning fostering and adoption, originally included the following paragraph:

It would be wrong arbitrarily to exclude any particular groups for consideration. But the

chosen way of life of some adults may mean that they would not be able to provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. No-one has a 'right' to be a foster parent. 'Equal rights' and 'gay rights' have no place in fostering services". [qtd in Gooding].

The legislators have ensured that the implication of "chosen way of life" is not missed by those who may interpret the law; pragmatic rules of relevance allow the reader to connect this trope to the reference to "gay rights", simply because it is a habitual euphemism for the gay lifestyle. The line referring to gay rights has now been dropped from the guidance, after lobbying by lesbian and gay groups. This is one victory that has been won for gay civil rights. In a complete reversal of encoded bigotry, the guidance now reads: "gay young men and women may require very sympathetic carers to enable them to accept their sexuality and to develop their own self-esteem".

Legislation in Britain sets the frame for the discussion of homosexuality. The gay or lesbian subject must, then, engage in a continual process of contestation, not just of a personal identity, but of the public representation of the whole category of lesbian and gay.

The case of Jane Brown stands as an example of the public vilification of a lesbian, faithfully transmitted by politicians and the press.

Jane Brown was (and, cheeringly, still is) a principal of a grade school in Hackney, London. Her 'crime' was to reject an offer of subsidized tickets to the Royal Opera's ballet performance of 'Romeo and Juliet'. Allegedly, Ms Brown gave as a reason, that the play was "entirely about heterosexual love". The episode ignited a media frenzy in January 1994, with many calls for Ms Brown's resignation, despite her popular leadership at the school and the support of the majority of the parents.

'The Times' refers to Ms Brown as a "headmistress" (O'Leary 1). Not only is this a gendered term, it is also overlaid with connotations of primness and prudishness, the implication being that a headmistress should not be thinking in sexual terms at all.

Two major themes emerge in the newspaper reports of this case and both arouse interdiscursive relations: political correctness and the portrayal of the 'lesbian' as stereotype.

'The Times' makes immediate reference to " the damaging effects of creeping political correctness" (O'Leary 1). 'The Guardian' refers variously to "a saga" and "a banquet" of political correctness (Katz 2). The lexical choice of "saga" is clearly intended to conjure up meanings of an entire mythology, while "banquet" has connotations of self-indulgent excess. "Political correctness" has obvious interdiscursive relations with all the other reports of this so-called movement. Interestingly 'political correctness' is never defined, merely inserted as a general villain. Political correctness has no meaning and ultimately no reference, because it is never contrasted with anything. However, meaning is implied, simply by the interdiscursive chains which are woven into the reports throughout the duration of the media interest in the case. For example, Ms Brown's actions are explicitly linked both to her lesbianism and to Hackney Council's "loony left image". Reference is made to the school's Equal Opportunity policy which covers racism, sexism and homophobia. All are seen to be part of the same package. A 1990's feature also appears in the chain - fundamentalism. 'The Guardian' writes of "spurious and fundamentalist dogmatism" (Katz 3), and also quotes the Director of Education in Hackney as saying: "Equal Opportunities is too serious an issue to be hijacked by the fundamentalism tendency" (qtd. in Katz 2). These utterances contain subtle echoes of Middle Eastern terrorism and Muslim militancy with the choice of "hijack" and "fundamentalism". "Fundamentalism", like its ally political correctness, is never defined or challenged. It's function is ideological - threading one set of textual references into another. "Tendency" is another pejoratively loaded choice. The prevailing discourse about both Marxists and lesbians is that they have, or form "tendencies". The lexical selection here reinforces the impression of subversion, perversion and unpleasant radicalism, made all the more sinister by the attribution of the adjective "persuasive" earlier in the same article to describe Jane Brown's leadership (Katz 2).

The construction of lesbianism is one of reflecting society's stereotype through the unwitting

vessel of Jane Brown. One Guardian writer characterizes her thus: "She posed awkwardly for photographers yesterday". (Meikle 3), while another Guardian description read:

> *With her short hair, heavy coat and workman style boots, she seemed to fit every stereotype of political correctness. Even her sullen, plainly unrepentant, expression seemed to match.* (Katz 2)

The emphasis on clothing and hairstyle, and especially those "workman" style boots encourage the presuppostion that these are inappropriate for a woman. The prevailing image of the inelegant and humorless lesbian is intact, and the statutory reference to 'political correctness' made in order to activate all previous discursive formations about gays and loony lefties. The adverbial clause which details her appearance is thematically foregrounded in the sentence, giving the impression that conformity to this description is an essential part of being a lesbian.

Lesbianism as portrayed by 'The Times' is not an intrinsic and healthy part of one's identity. Their writers describe "yesterday's admission by Ms Brown that she is a lesbian" (Ellis 13), as if this were a sin or a guilty secret. 'The Guardian' reports a statement by the Director of Education that he was "embarrassed to enquire about such personal matters" (qtd in Katz 2). Quite clearly then, lesbianism should remain invisibly in the sphere of the private, lest it affront those who must encounter it.

Another unique instance of the law denouncing lesbian sex was the case of "Jimmy," a young woman of sixteen, who had sex with two other teenage women on many occasions. The two young women later denied that they had known that "Jimmy" was female, and she was charged with indecent assault. What was shocking about the case was that a sentence of six years imprisonment was delivered for what had been at the time consensual sex. Carefully positioning the 'victims' as passive in the affair, the judge said he suspected that the victims "would rather have been raped

by some young man.....you have called into question their whole sexual identity." (Smith 7) Obviously a heterosexual identity is a very fragile thing when confronted with lesbians.

Reporting the Parliamentary Vote on the Age of Consent for Gay Men 1993/1994

In February 1994 British Members of Parliament voted to lower the age of consent for gay men from 21, where it had been since 1967, to 18. The original proposal before Parliament was that the age of consent should be lowered to age 16 to bring it into line with the age of consent for heterosexual sex, and indeed for lesbian sex. This was the first time that gays and lesbians had rallied together since the battles over Section 28 in 1988. Here we can see the hegemonic struggle played out in the newspapers surveyed, with churchmen and right-wing commentators framing the debate in terms of prurient judgements about sexual behavior, and the gay community adopting the stance of a human rights issue.

The question of behavior is laid out graphically for the readership of the quality dailies. The Church of England reveals itself as the height of delicacy, describing homosexual sex as "falling short of God's ideal" (Wroe 23). Simon Raven, a right-wing novelist, interviewed in 'The Guardian' writes, predictably, about "buggery" as a "thoroughly nasty, messy, painful, cruel business", and of a boy being "feeble enough" to "be enticed into being buggered" (qtd. in Bennett 5). The presupposition of "entice" is that the desire for sex with another man would never occur to a younger one without prior suggestion. Another presupposition, signalled by the transitivity choice of the verb, is that the sexual act will be experienced entirely passively by the teenage partner, and that there can be no other possibility. Furthermore the adjectives assign an unpleasant tone to an act of mutual gratification. This latter meaning has been excluded from the reader's contemplation. An MP, Robert Spink announces that: "The buggery of teenage boys is the only issue on the table", and refers to the "pro-buggery lobby" (qtd. in Bates 1). The insistent use of the action verb

reinforces the concept of homosexuality as being synonymous with and confined to the act of anal sex.

Feebleness, penetration and questionable manhood are all recurring discourse themes from the anti-16 side of the debate. Donald Campbell, a psychoanalyst, comments on the action of having "an older man put his penis in the boy's anus". 'The Guardian' summarizes his assertion that girls may find penetration at sixteen frightening, but it will have less impact on their overall development. However, the law must "cushion boys from the risk of penetration" as that may "drastically influence his future sexuality by altering his image of what kind of a man he is" (qtd. in Pilkington 4). The uncertainty betrayed by the choice of modal "may" is superceded by the extreme lexical choices made - the influence may be "drastic"; the event may "alter" his whole self-concept. This concept is limited of course to the notion of manhood, which we are lead to infer is incompatible with the act of being penetrated. Gay sex, then, is not a consensual and rewarding experience; it acts purely to create a subjectivity of victimhood and of being another kind of man.

The theme of the family, which traverses several texts and discursive formations, ranging from abortion to homosexuality, also features in these reports. Tony Higton, a member of the General Synod of the Church of England pronounces that: "any lowering of the age of consent is going to be yet another nail in the coffin for marriage and the family" (qtd. in Bennett 5). The modality of "is going to be" suggests the speaker's certainty and this is syntactically linked with the threat to "the family". We note the complete absence of any intellectual steps between the two processes identified. The metaphor of "yet another nail in the coffin" assumes that the process is already underway - the family is mortally wounded. The issue functions to make a connection with other texts impacting on "the family", whilst at the same time refuting the notion of gay families.

The reverend Ian Paisley, who for years has vented his apocalyptic convictions in the province of Ulster (Northern Ireland), reserves some of the same for homosexuals. "The cement that holds society together is the family. As goes the family, so will go the nation. If we don't have the

cement of the family, society will disintegrate and be destroyed" (qtd. in White and Bates 6). No inductive discontinuities in this statement! The only imponderable is that of which agent to supply for the passive "be destroyed". The metaphor of cement reveals the belief in the family as an impregnable and durable structure. There is a transitivity feature of hypotheticality in the second sentence, to maximize the portentious effect of his intimidating rhetoric. Here, as with the discourse elicited in the context of the section 28 debate, we view with irony, Paisley's assertion of the weakness and instability of traditional society and the family unit.

Other themes from the right-wing side of the debate cluster around the notions of the immaturity and supposed vulnerability of boys. The impression, then, is of a society which places a high value on its young men. The Times editorial writer offers this opinion:

> *Protecting this minority from acts which they may later regret and a sexual path which may leave them isolated and unhappy should remain a priority. It is a mark of a civilized society that it values the interests of young people more than abstract liberties (Voting for change 15).*

The grammatical theme is expressed by the gerundive "protecting". The use of a verbal form rather than a nominalization indicates that society and the forces of protection should be active. Other lexical choices of "regret" and "unhappy" represent the gay subject as an unfortunate one. The group noun "minority" traces a lexical cohesion with "isolated". The last sentence skillfully deflects the core of the debate from the issue of "liberty", which has interdiscursive relations with "equality", to the foregrounded issue of "civilization" and that of the protection of the young.

Interestingly, nearly all participants in this debate overlook the key word 'consent'.

Hegemonic Struggle - A Discussion

The stated aim of this paper was to identify discursive formations - those rules by which sentence and thematic patterns are made more likely by the occurrence and combination of previous discursive practice. Collectively the statements analyzed in this paper form a pattern of discourse whose effect is to create an atmosphere where there can be legitimate censure of the open expression of homosexuality. The public image of gays and lesbians is framed by the linguistic activation and chaining of the themes of indecency, corruption, violence, buggery, the dread terror of "fundamentalism" and "political correctness", and the threat to "the family". These are all imaginary moral concerns and are devoid of argument value. If the underlying premises about lesbians and gays in the texts above are drawn together, several more themes emerge:

- the ambivalence about legality: "exempting certain conduct from criminal penalties" implies a favor, though gay behaviour remains essentially criminal and subject to legal surveillance.

- enforcement of invisibility: acts must be performed in "private" and homosexuality must not be "promoted" into the public sphere. In fact all you need to know about homosexuality is that it carries the promise of disease.

- the corrupting nature of gay sex: one may be "charmed" into a homosexual relationship, perhaps even into "the horror of lesbianism", or be "enticed into being buggered".

- the fragile nature of heterosexual identity: it may crumble at the first acquaintance with homosexuality.

- the family life metaphor, the sanctity of which is so challengeded by "pretended families".

The recurrent discursive patterns identified in this paper have no other role than to reinforce

a hegemonic perception of lesbians and gays, which impedes the creation of new discourse, by distracting from any discussion of themes which reflect the reality and true concerns of gays. It can almost seem as if there is no other language to talk about gays: the words "gay" and "lesbian" are inseparable from the themes and lexical choices mentioned above. This is the architecture of internal and external homophobia.

Patterns of discourse and interdiscursive relations maintain a forceful ideological effect. With amplification from the mainstream media, it is an effect which is proving difficult to override.

Michel Foucault recognises a politics whose focus is on the body and the function of whose discipline is to create conformist subjects who may be more easily moulded by an authoritarian state. That discipline is transmitted and naturalized by discourse. But for Foucault, discourse is not a simple matter of the dominant outweighing the dominated. Discourse can be " a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (100). He gives as an example the nineteenth century medicalization of homosexuality which, paradoxically, gave rise to the possibility of a 'reverse discourse', "homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (101).

Fairclough, though, draws attention to a weakness in Foucault's argument; Foucault's reluctance to deal with a textually oriented framework leads him to assume that resistance can only take place within the parameters of the prevailing discourse and as such have no transforming capacity. But when we reflect on the discursive struggles implied here, the gay subject, while oppressed by the discourse, is not a prisoner of it. Rather, the relationship between subjects and discursive practices is a dialectical one in which subjects can, with effort, shape and restructure the discourse in continuity with their own evolving identity. Perhaps hegemony theory can provide insights here; the creation of an alternative hegemony might result from the struggle to represent other experiences and subjectivities. As social change becomes a reality, the gay lobby has

endeavored to promote the themes of equality and anti-discrimination. There are discursive signposts that the ground is beginning to shift, most notably in the controversy about the nature of " the family", and the exclusion or inclusion of queer "pretended families" from this institution.

Gays and lesbians must now address the task of inserting our meanings into arenas of public discourse. We must redefine the terms and presuppositions of public discourse as they reflect on the gay subject and the gay lifestyle. It is essential to intervene to sever those interdiscursive chains that link gays and lesbians to notions of disease and corruption. This requires more than an adjustment of lexical choice, because the defammation goes beyond mere labelling. Grammatical awareness and sensitivity is just as important a weapon with which to challenge those who would position us transitively as passive victims. Rather than attempting to rearticulate through the prevailing discourse, we queers must raise our voices from the margins and, armed with a critical linguistic framework, propound our own narrative.

There are enough points of contradiction in the discourse of the rightwing for gays and lesbians to exploit in the 1990's battle for the discursive highground, and, since the way ideology structures meaning, is most often reflected in practice and legislation, this is certainly a project whose time has come.

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